DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 848 UD 026 047

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TITLE Oral Tradition of Italian-Americans.
PUB DATE 24 Apr 87
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, (1st, Irvine, CA, April 24-30, 1987). For other conference papers, see UD 026 041-047.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; *Activism; *Females; Feminism; *Folk Culture; Foreign Countries; Immigrants; Italian Americans; *Oral History; Political Power; Religious Education; Self Determination
IDENTIFIERS Catholic Church; *Italian Culture; *Italians

ABSTRACT

The assimilation of Italians into American culture led to the loss of the Italian language, and an oral tradition of Italian peasants in which Italian feminist philosophy was grounded. The legends, parables, and proverbs told by these Italian women challenged the teachings of Catholicism, perpetuating an underground religious tradition which worshipped female deities. Some of the activist activities of these women are the following: (1) socialist demonstrations in the late 19th century; (2) anarchist, Marxist, and feminist confrontations which led to social changes; (3) opposition to troop trains to Libya; (4) protests of World War I; (5) strikes; (6) resistance to fascism; and (7) the practice of birth control in defiance of church and state. The political impact of the women's oral tradition was a self-determined libertarian socialism. The study of this movement was documented in volumes of folklore in the 19th century. Today in Italy the study of this oral tradition is considered an enterprise of the political left. (VM)

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ORAL TRADITION OF ITALIAN-AMERICANS

by
Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum

The Italian peasant oral tradition - -with themes more equalitarian, more millennial, and more woman-centered than the doctrines of the catholic church[1] - - was placed in jeopardy by twentieth century "americanization" campaigns that aimed to inculcate (in emigrants and others) the values of the dominant culture. The loss of the Italian language was pivotal to the separation of Italian Americans from this peasant oral tradition. Where Italian was preserved, for example in university Italian Studies programs, the literature studied was largely that of the northern Italian ruling class and its retainers.

I am a Sicilian American woman who has made a contribution to the construction of a multi-cultural canon for the U. S. by writing a history of Italian feminists. Implicitly my liberazione della donna - feminism in Italy (Wesleyan University Press, 1986) suggests that the values of the homeland culture are significant to Italian Americans. This is counter to mainstream "ethnic" studies (e.g., that of the Journal of American Ethnic History) which

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limits the history (and heritage) of Italian Americans to their experience since arrival at Ellis Island; this limitation, in effect, becomes a continuation of earlier "americanization" campaigns. Liberazione della donna (which has won a 1987 American Book Award) also suggests the value of comparative studies, offering a revealing Italian mirror to U. S. women of a feminism that works for the liberation of everyone.

Italian feminists, and the peasant oral tradition on which they are grounded, emphasize an "unedited judeo-christian gospel" and an "unedited marxism," an Italian version of "liberation theology" with global implications. After 1968, Italian women placed the most advanced feminist legislation of Europe into the Italian code; they have pushed for democratic changes that have, by the 1980s, "transformed the nature of Italian communism."

In the legends, parables and proverbs Italian women told their children for millennia, they transmitted beliefs heretical to papal catholicism, perpetuating a subterranean religious tradition grounded on pre-judeo-christian female deities, Greek and Roman goddesses, early women of the first centuries of christianity (notably Magdalen), saints who skirted church orthodoxy (e.g., S. Teresa di Avila), and a madonna whose rootedness in a prechristian tradition is evident in the Black Madonna of Tindari and her premillennial characterization as peasant girl in the paintings of Antonello da Messina.

This subterranean religious tradition helped to mold an Italian peasant woman whose views were nominally catholic, but whose beliefs were never consistent with papal catholicism. After the fifteenth century, Italian peasants descended into deepening miseria. In the late nineteenth century, Italian peasant women joined men in socialist demonstrations, with politics close to the beliefs of their oral tradition. In the twentieth century, this heretical peasant oral tradition melded with the Italian worker movement, with anarchist, marxist, and feminist beliefs, and exploded into the confrontations and changes of 1968 and thereafter.

In the early twentieth century Italian women opposed troop trains to Libya, protested World War I, and initiated a general strike at Turin in 1917 for pane e pace. After both world wars of the twentieth century, Italian women, with the bandiera rossa and with babies, occupied factories and unused land. Italian women's resistance to Italian fascism in the twentieth century was also informed by their strong peasant tradition. In response to Mussolini's declaration that the test of his regime would be an increase in the birth rate. Italian women, practicing birth control and abortion in defiance of church and state, caused the birth rate to decline, and it has continued to do so to this date.

After 1968 the peasant tradition was visible in Italian feminist banners: "L'utero è mio e me lo gestisco io" (it

is my uterus and I shall manage it). Defying the catholic church and the orthodox marxism of men of the Italian communist party (who urged women to put aside "personal" demands), Italian feminists after 1968 put divorce, federally funded nursery schools, equal family rights, equal pay for equal work, and legal abortion into law. They have bypassed the commedia dell'arte of Italian national politics, with a movimentismo that crosses parties for work for nonviolence, ecology, and women's issues. Women have finessed an advanced bill against sexual violence,secured a committee to insure genuine equality in particular workplaces, and, in the June 1987 elections, redoubled their presence in parliament.

The global significance of an Italian "unedited gospel" and "unedited marxism" (both with ties to Italy's oral tradition) is the connection with nearly a billion catholics of the world, notably in Latin American countries. By "unedited, " Italians mean no intermediary interpreters of the judeo-christian gospel or of marxism. Bypassing party and church, these beliefs are close to the Gnostic Gospel concept of direct apprehension of truth and to the mysticism of S. Teresa. Philosophically, the feminist maxim "Io sono mia" replaces the "Cogito, ergo sum" of Cartesian rationalism. Italian women know by looking inward, touching the center of their being with ancestral memories handed down by the oral tradition. They balance looking inward by looking at "others." Taking Simone de Beauvoir's

concept of woman as "other," Italian women have deepened the concept with their franciscan tradition (which in Italy has also been handed down orally). Considering themselves "other," Italian women identify with all the "others" of the earth - - not only the poor of the South of the globe, but all who are culturally discriminated against.

The political implication of this subterranean Italian oral tradition is a self-determined libertarian socialism. For Italian women, and others inspired by left catholicism since the 1960s, all issues of life and death (from abortion to nuclear bases) are resolved in individual conscience.

The cosmology of Italian feminists, like that of the oral tradition of peasants for millennia, is woman-centered. This is in contrast to the male-centeredness of doctrinal catholicism and of protestantism. Harking back to the earth mother who preceded judeo-christianity, and closer to the black madonna of third world women than to the blue and white madonna of the church (whom church fathers demoted to virgin saint and set off from other women), sociologists call this woman-centered cluster of beliefs the "real" religion of Italy. The great writers of Italy (e.g., Ignazio Silone) have celebrated this "black Persephone in the grain" who withers the grain but also causes the flowers to bloom.

In Italy, the study of the oral tradition was initiated at the end of the 19th century when folklorists like

Giuseppe Pitré collected the stories women told and put them into multi-volumed collections. In today's Italy the study of the oral tradition of folklore is an enterprise of left catholicism and of the political left. For Antonio Gramsci, perhaps the major theorist of Italian communism, autogestione (self-determination) is not possible until each person has the self-assurance that arises from knowing one's own cultural heritage. Italian feminists tap this cultural heritage when they say "Io sono mia." (I am my own person). They call on women of the world to strive for self-determination, a nuclear-free and unpolluted environment, and responsibility for life. Connecting with the oppressed of the world, they say, "Siamo in tante." (we are many).

1 Note: removing capital letters from almost everything is part of the continuing Italian enterprise of democratizing all institutions.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This paper is background information of great interest, but for teachers wanting to present the story of the poor Italian woman immigrant in American, we recommend The Fortunate Pilgrim by Mario Puzo and Umbertina by Helen Barolini. The most important source is The Dream Book An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women, ed, and w introd by Helen Barolini.